

## CORY'S LEAST BITTERN AT ITHACA, N. Y.

BY ARTHUR A. ALLEN.

*Plate XXI.*

ON the afternoon of May 17, while trudging through the marsh that lies at the head of Cayuga Lake, I flushed a strange bird from the cat-tails about fifteen feet before me. Its size and manner of flight were those of the Least Bittern, but it had none of the buffy markings so characteristic of that species. Instead its neck and breast appeared rich chestnut, and the wings uniformly dark. After the usual manner of the Least Bittern, it flew about one hundred yards and dropped again into the flags. Proceeding toward the spot, I called to Mr. Francis Harper, who was tramping through an adjoining part of the marsh, and we advanced together searching the waist-deep cat-tails for the bird. For a time we looked in vain, but finally it flushed about twenty feet from where we were standing. Despairing of finding it again in the flags while alive, I took a parting shot at it with a collecting pistol and succeeded in bringing it down. Upon picking it up, we found that it was a Cory's Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*). No vital spot had been touched by the shot, so we resolved to keep it alive as long as possible, or at least until Mr. Fuertes could find time to make sketches of the living bird, an opportunity not frequently occurring with this species. Returning to the Field Station, we placed the Bittern in an empty pail and left it alone for several minutes. When we returned, it fluttered excitedly and gave a hoarse cry very similar to that of the Least Bittern which Chapman has described as "a low frightened *qua*." It struck me, at the time, as somewhat harsher than that of the Least Bittern, but not having heard the latter recently, I might have been mistaken. This was the only sound emitted during its three days of captivity.

The bird proved a most interesting though untamable pet. One exercised care in approaching the box in which it was kept, for the long neck and spear-like bill were darted out with alarming rapidity, and with force sufficient to draw blood. Its usual atti-

tude was with the neck drawn back and the bill inclined slightly upward in characteristic heron pose. Occasionally, when slightly alarmed, it gradually extended its neck until it was stretched upward to its full length, the bill and even the body then assuming an almost vertical position. This was sometimes accomplished by movements so slow that it was difficult to perceive them with the eye. The resulting figure of the bird, as it faced the direction from which the disturbance arose, was nearly as slender as a rush and nearly as inconspicuous. When fully extended, the bittern sometimes slowly rotated until it had surveyed all sides with its piercing yellow eyes. With its bill pointed directly upward and its brilliant eyes directed forward past the angle of the mouth, it presented a very odd appearance. If the disturber next approached, the long neck subsided, the body settled, the feathers ruffled, the wings drooped, and the primaries spread until the bird seemed several times its original size. The bill was always held more or less vertical, except when directed in vicious jabs toward the observer. If one now continued to approach, the bittern swayed from side to side as though with excitement, its feathers fairly bristling and its diabolical eyes shining. If left alone for a time, it gradually assumed a more natural pose. A sudden sound had quite the reverse effect from that of the slight disturbance. Instead of extending its neck, it quickly crouched and drew its feathers very close to the body until it looked but one-half its natural size. The accompanying photographs show these poses well, if one allows for an unnatural drooping of the wing resulting from a break at the elbow joint.

The bittern was kept in a box about eight inches deep, containing a layer of sawdust and a shallow dish of water. In this dish were placed some small fish and tadpoles. Aside from the disappearance of one of the minnows while we were out of the room, there were no apparent signs of interest shown by the Bittern in the proffered food. Nor would it at first swallow any of the fish placed in its bill, unless they were directed well down into its throat when they disappeared automatically. On the second day, however, it lost some of its timidity, and twice it swallowed small fish placed crosswise in its bill. The function of the minute serrations on the mandibles was well demonstrated at these times, for the bird showed no difficulty in holding the slippery fish no matter

how much it struggled. After each feeding the bird became very much excited, swaying from side to side and bristling up all of its feathers, especially those of the crown and nape.

In spite of its crippled condition, the bittern showed great activity when left alone, and several times escaped from its box, which was left uncovered because of the bird's assumed helpless condition. The first time it not only climbed out of the box, but also managed to get down to the floor from the table upon which it was standing. Just how this was accomplished, with both wings and one leg broken, was not discovered since it remained quiet as long as any one was near. After the third day of its captivity, when it seemed to be losing in strength and lustre of plumage, and after Mr. Fuertes had made such studies as he desired, it was sent away to be mounted.

Allowing for six specimens from Florida, sixteen from Toronto, two from Michigan, and one each from Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Ohio, this is the twenty-eighth recorded specimen of Cory's Least Bittern. It is a female in good plumage, and shows none of the albinistic tendencies observed in so many of the previous specimens.

---

## AN ANNOTATED LIST OF THE BIRDS OF SANBORN COUNTY, SOUTHEAST-CENTRAL SOUTH DAKOTA.

BY STEPHEN SARGENT VISHER.

ONLY two lists of the birds of portions of eastern South Dakota have so far been published. 'Birds of the Coteau des Prairies' (the lake region of the northeastern corner) by C. E. McChesney,<sup>1</sup> and 'The Birds of Extreme Southeastern Dakota' by G. S. Agersborg.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> One hundred species based on one year's work were given in 'Forest and Stream' for 1871. A more complete list of 152 species is to be found in Bulletin 5, United States Geological and Geological Survey of the Territories, 1875.

<sup>2</sup> A list, revised by W. W. Cooke, of 225 species observed mainly in the vicinity of Vermilion, in 'The Auk,' 1885.